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Taking a lead on foreign affairs

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WASHINGTON — Sen. Jesse Helms has called Sen. Richard Lugar once or twice a week from North Carolina for the last five or six weeks just to chat about American foreign policy.

Recently, Helms (R., N.C.) asked Lugar whether three businessmen from Raleigh, N.C., could fly here to tell Lugar their sentiments on where the United States should be heading internationally. Lugar (R., Ind.) met with them for half an hour.

Why has Helms directed so much personal attention Lugar's way? Like others with a vital interest in foreign affairs, Helms just wants a few words with the new chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Helms passed up the chance to sit in Lugar's chair, reluctantly honoring a campaign pledge to remain as chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Now Helms is watching Lugar take the lead on international issues that he'd like to have a hand in as well.

That presents Lugar with yet another complication as he assumes a post that, to begin with, carries a reelection jinx. The last three committee chairmen were voted out of their Senate seats, with Charles Percy, the Illinois Republican, the latest victim.

Committee divided

Lugar is taking over a committee that in recent years has been bitterly divided on major foreign policy issues and largely ineffectual as a result. Forging a bipartisan consensus on the committee will be difficult, if not impossible, during the 99th Congress.

The Indiana Republican will be forced to serve as an intermediary between conservative White House foreign policy aides and a State Department run by career foreign service officers and Secretary of State George P. Shultz, a moderate.

Finally, Lugar must also contend with his image in Congress as a staunch White House loyalist. Lugar voted with President Reagan 95 percent of the time in 1983; no other member of Congress aligned himself more closely with administration policies. Lugar will have to over-

come that image if he hopes to forge a foreign policy consensus in the committee and Congress, committee aides say.

Lugar's willingness to follow administration policy precedes him to such an extent that despite his reputation as a man who researches major issues thoroughly before he forms his opinions, he may find it impossible to convince committee Democrats that he is willing to hear their side, the aides say.

"Clearly, Lugar would like to make the committee more visible than it's been in the past, but I would see his role as advancing the administration's foreign policy as much as possible," said a top Democratic committee aide.

'Grave times'

However, turning the country in new directions on foreign policy — as well as restoring the committee's influence — appears to be very much on Lugar's mind these days.

"These are grave times," Lugar said during a recent interview. "I think the Foreign Relations Committee will be an extremely important committee in the next two years. I'm really looking forward to the challenge. Everything I've ever gone into I've rejuvenated and changed, and I don't expect this situation to be any different."

Unless Lugar moves quickly to assure Democrats in Congress that he can act independently of the White House, the committee could be stalemated for two more years, aides say.

"Republicans are only going to have a one-vote majority on the committee, and at least two of the Republicans do tend to bolt to the other side," said a Republican committee aide. "And there is a very unified Democratic minority on the committee."

If Lugar is unable to work with the Democrats on his committee, as Percy was frequently unable to do, it will "present some real problems for him," the Republican aide added.

High profile

Since assuming control of the committee in late November, Lugar, perhaps in an effort to tone down his image as a White House loyalist, has taken some high-profile stances on foreign policy.

- In one of his first moves as Foreign Relations chairman, he sent a private letter to Reagan warning him that his administration needed to take a tougher public stand against apartheid in South Africa.

- Lugar asked the Senate Intelligence Committee staff to investigate reports that the Army had carried out secret helicopter missions in Central America to aid pro-American forces there. And he has floated a proposal that the United States permanently cut off funding to U.S.-backed rebels in Central America if Nicaragua agrees not to export its leftist revolution to nearby countries, like El Salvador.

- He announced that he intended to hold a broad series of hearings on all aspects of American foreign policy early this year in an attempt to salve some ideological wounds inflicted in previous years.

- He met privately with Shultz after conservatives complained that the secretary of state was orchestrating an "ideological purge" at the State Department.

Lugar said later that most of the

personnel changes Shultz was planning — replacing conservative political appointees in many instances with moderate, career foreign service officers — were good choices and that he would "do his best" to make sure his committee approved the nominations.